LAOS: ANATOMY OF AN AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT

By Roland A. Paul

WHEN President Kennedy came to office in 1961, he was startled to learn that almost 700 American soldiers, more than half of whom were members of the Special Forces, were in Laos, while about 500 Soviet troops were there providing logistics support to the local communist forces, the Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese allies.

Fearing the possible consequences of such a confrontation and considering American interests in Laos to be small, President Kennedy sought to disengage. Negotiations ensued at Vienna, at Geneva, in Laos and elsewhere. The result was the ambiguous compromise set forth in rather unambiguous language in the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos and the Protocol to that Declaration, signed by 13 communist and non-communist countries in July 1962, commonly known as the Geneva Accords of 1962.

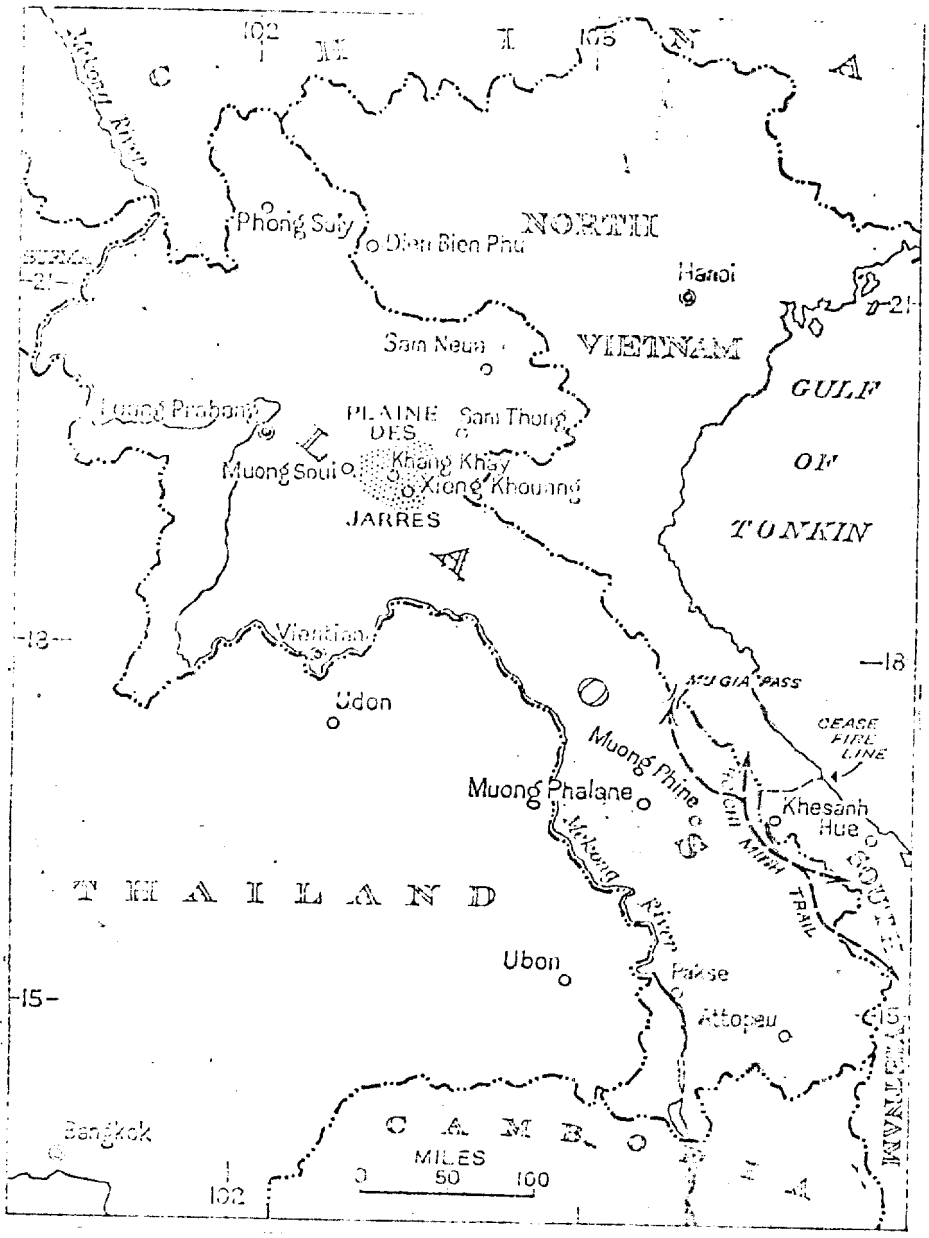
Under the mantle of this agreement, the Laotians themselves established a tripartite government composed of right-wing royalist elements under General Phoumi Nosavan, neutralist elements under Prince Souvanna Phouma and communist elements whose nominal leader was Prince Souphanouvong (Souvanna Phouma's half brother). The balance of power in the government was given to the neutralists, and their leader Souvanna Phouma became Prime Minister, a post he holds today.

The Geneva Accords themselves required Laos to disassociate herself from all military alliances, including SEATO, prohibited the introduction of foreign military personnel and civilians performing quasi-military functions (except for a small French training mission), precluded the establishment of any foreign military installations in Laos and forbade the use of Laotian territory to interfere with the internal affairs of another country. Pursuant to this agreement the Americans and Soviets withdrew their military personnel. The North Vietnamese, however, failed to withdraw most of their 6,000-man force that was then in Laos.

Nevertheless, a relative peace settled over this somnolent "Land of the Million Elephants" for about one year, to be shattered in 1963 by an exchange of assassinations. The non-communist officer Colonel Ketsana was murdered and shortly thereafter the pro-Chinese Foreign Minister Quinim Pholsema was killed. These sparked a renewal of the fighting in Laos, which has raged ever since.

To understand the nature of the hostilities in Laos, one must bear three points in mind. First is the fact that the Laotians are a very peaceful, in some cases indolent, people. Accordingly, they generally make poor soldiers. This is true whether they march, or walk, under the red flag of communism or the white elephant and parasol emblem of the neutralist government. They are no match for the well-trained soldiers of North Vietnam. Until recently, this was evidenced all too frequently by the flight of government forces upon learning that they were facing an opposing force composed of North Vietnamese.

There is one exception to this behavior, however. The 250–300,000 Meo tribesmen (no one knows precisely how many there are) and the other smaller Montagnard tribes come from different stock and have been hardened by centuries of nomadic life, slash-and-burn farming, principally opium poppies, and oppression at the hands of their neighbors, historically the Chinese. Sustained and supported by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency,



these warriors, under the leadership of Meo General Vang Pao, constitute the bulk of the central government's paramilitary forces and by far its most effective fighters. Thus, one of the countless ironies of the war in Laos, at least in contrast to the conflict in Vietnam, is that the main force of guerrillas in Laos is on the non-communist side. In passing, it may be interesting to note that because of their long association with the American agency, the hill tribes have shifted their agricultural emphasis from opium to rice.

The second major point for one who would hope to understand the bizarre war going on in the jungles and grasslands of Laos is the seasonal pattern of the conflict. During the dry season that lasts from October to early June, the communists invariably make their greatest advances. In the ensuing rainy season each year, with the communist supply lines clogged, the forces of the central government have been able to recoup most of their losses of the preceding dry season, often with very little opposition. This pattern has been so regular that in most years Souvanna Phouma has been able to count on taking his annual vacation in France in the month of June.

Third, and perhaps most important in any analysis of American policy toward Laos, is the fact that it is not a single war, but two distinct conflicts being fought there for quite different purposes and to some extent by different forces. The contest being waged by the government forces of Laos supported by their American and Thai allies against the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese allies for political control of the kingdom is carried on in northern and central Laos and, to some extent, in the Mekong River Valley in the western half of the Laotian panhandle.

The other war involves the efforts of the North Vietnamese to use the network of roads, waterways and trails in the eastern part of the Laotian panhandle as a corridor for the transportation and provisioning of their forces fighting in South Vietnam, and more recently in Cambodia, and the efforts by the Americans and South Vietnamese to interdict such traffic. Regular Laotian forces hardly participate here. This is the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the northern entrance of which is generally considered to be the Mu Gia Pass less than 100 miles north of the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Vietnam. The contest on and over the Ho Chi Minh Trail is actually only an adjunct of the struggle for power in South Vietnam. Until the recent invasion by South Vietnamese troops, supported by U.S. air power, the American involvement was mainly in northern and central Laos.

While Laotians, Vietnamese, Americans and Thais contest for power in Laos, there are more than 10,000 Chinese soldiers in the northernmost provinces of Laos who serve as construction crews and security troops in connection with the extension of one of several roads originally laid out by the Chinese in years past. Another one of the ironies in Laos is that the Chinese were first invited to do road construction there in 1962 by Souvanna Phouma as Prime Minister and the right-wing leader Phoumi Nosavan as his Defense Minister.

The road now being worked on somewhat intermittently extends into Laos 80 miles south, with a branch 40 miles in a northeasterly direction toward Dien Bien Phu. American policy-makers view this roadbuilding effort with obvious concern, particularly to the extent it indicates Chinese movement toward the Thai border in the bulge west of Luang Prabang. The non-communists avoid this Chinese presence as if it were a jungle ogre that must not be disturbed. Even the Aeroflot flights from Moscow to Hanoi detour to avoid overflying the region.

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Let us now turn back to the autumn of 1962, three months after the signing of the Geneva Accords. The United States by this time had come to realize that the North Vietnamese were not going to withdraw their forces from Laos. It therefore agreed to provide Souvanna Phouma with certain limited amounts of military equipment. This was permitted by the Geneva Accords. In order to administer the program we set up a small office in our AID mission at Vientiane under the nondescript title of the "Requirements Office" and staffed it with retired American military officers, though this was of dubious legality under the Geneva Accords. This was the beginning of the American military assistance program to the present régime in Laos.

Still another one of the ironies of the war in Laos is that the government of Laos under Souvanna Phouma which we now support was the faction in 1961 which we were actively opposing and which the communists were supporting. Our champion in those days was General Phoumi Nosavan.

With the outbreak of serious hostilities in 1963, the United States began to train Laotian pilots and ground crews in Thailand. By the spring of 1964 the war was going badly for the government forces. The communists were able to overrun the remaining government positions on the Plaine des Jarres, the famous and picturesque plateau situated in the center of Laos. In the face of this threat American tactical fighter-bombers began striking targets in northern Laos under what was publicly described as "armed reconnaissance." This was not a large American effort. There were only 20 such sorties in the whole year of 1964, a sortie being a single mission by a single aircraft.

We also began to provide greater amounts of war matériel and other assistance. To transport Laotian supplies and military personnel, the services of the semi-commercial American companies Air America and Continental Air Services were made available, both their airplanes and their helicopters.

The communist drive in 1964 was stopped on the western reaches of the Plaine des Jarres at the town of Muong Soui. Invariably journalistic references to the Plaine des Jarres describe it in terms such as "strategic" or "key." Inasmuch as this plain has remained in communist hands from 1964 to the time of this writing, except for a few months in 1969, and as the Souvanna Phouma government has continued to remain [illegible] percent of the population, the implications of such terms do not seem apt.

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The government forces launched an offensive in another part of Laos in the summer of 1964, the rainy season. No American air strikes were provided, but a few American airmen went along with the Laotian forces on the ground to guide Laotian planes to their targets, and eight American soldiers accompanied the Laotian regiments as military advisers.

In the autumn of the same year, at American request, Laotian fighter-bombers began to hit North Vietnamese supply routes along the panhandle of Laos. In 1965, as the war in South Vietnam intensified, American aircraft took over this mission.

The war in Laos has seesawed back and forth ever since. The government forces made impressive gains in 1967, advancing to within 20 miles of the North Vietnamese border and reaching the outskirts of Sam Neua, the principal town in the communist-held portion of Laos. With substantially increased Soviet assistance in matériel, the communists launched offensives in 1968 and 1969 (the planning for the first of which coincided with the planning for the Tet offensive in South Vietnam). These communist drives in Laos wiped out the gains made by the government forces in the previous year and brought the communists beyond their previously held positions. In June 1969 Muong Soui fell to them and they encircled the royal capital of Luang Prabang from three sides.[1] That they did not push on and seize this city is one of the curiosities of the war that may be of more than passing significance.

As the war intensified in these years, so did American involvement. In 1960 about 50 U.S. Air Force officers and enlisted men, technically assigned to the Air Attaché's office, were stationed at the Laotian Air Force bases as advisers. In 1967 about the same number of U.S. Army personnel were deployed to the regional headquarters of the Laotian Army for similar duty. The Americans who had briefly served with the Laotian forces to guide tactical aircraft to their targets were replaced by Laotians, who by now had been trained to do such work. And about 20 U.S. Air Force pilots stationed in Laos and others stationed in Thailand began to serve as airborne forward air controllers in single-engine slow-moving airplanes for the same purpose.

As the American air war over North Vietnam intensified, several navigational aid facilities were installed in Laos to guide American F-4s, F-105s and other aircraft to their targets. Some of them were manned by U.S. Air Force personnel; others were unmanned. One of the manned facilities was set up at Muong Phalane in the panhandle. It was overrun by communist forces on Christmas Day 1967 with the loss of two American lives. In October 1967 another such facility was placed on a 5,000-foot cliff in northern Laos just 13 miles from the North Vietnamese border at a place called Phou Pha Thi, then in the hands of friendly Meo tribesmen. This facility functioned for five months and then was overrun by communist forces on March 11, 1968, with the loss of all but a few of the Americans who were there.

By far the largest American contribution to the war in northern Laos has been the air strikes by American Air Force planes against communist interdiction and close-in targets. By 1969 the level of such strikes had reached more than 100 sorties a day—not including any near the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos. The increased American involvement in the war in northern Laos can be shown graphically by the ever-increasing sortie rate over that area, ranging from 20 per year in 1964 to 52 per day in December 1968 and more than 100 per day in 1969.

The large increase in 1969 was a result of the increased intensity of enemy action in northern Laos well into the rainy season, the availability of American aircraft following the cessation of bombing over North Vietnam, and the reduced number of targets on the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the rainy season.

[1] The king of Laos resides at Luang Prabang. The administrative offices of Souvanna Phouma's government are at Vientiane.

There is a significant distinction between American air operations over northern Laos and those formerly over North Vietnam that may explain the greater success our air power has achieved in Laos. In North Vietnam our air strikes were exclusively against interdiction targets. The enemy controlled all of the ground there. By contrast, our operations in northern Laos involve close air support for friendly forces in addition to strikes at interdiction targets. Furthermore, the friendly forces are indigenous guerrillas and the enemy is composed of roadbound conventional forces. Thus, we have advantages in terms of target acquisition, as well as fairly minimal antiaircraft opposition.

The next most important assistance which we have provided to the Laotians has been the aid we have been giving to General Vang Pao's Montagnard forces. With CIA and U.S. Army advisers and substantial American logistics support, these forces have borne the brunt of the battle for the Vientiane government. According to Henry Kamm in the October 26, 1969 *New York Times*, Vang Pao's troops are "armed, equipped, fed, paid, guided strategically and tactically, and often transported into and out of action by the United States."

The U.S. Air Force advisers with the Laotian Air Force exercise great influence over their protégés; but the American Army advisers, except those with General Vang Pao's forces, have much less influence with the Laotian Army. The air force advisers in effect, if not in name, run the air force of Laos. That force is small, composed of relatively intelligent officers and men motivated by an esprit and sense of professionalism lacking in most of the other Royal Laotian units. Working with men of this caliber, the American airmen have little difficulty in guiding operations along the lines of their own experience and training. Not so with many of the Laotian Army units. The lot of the American Army majors and captains assigned to them as advisers is often a frustrating one. Besides the natural Laotian disinclination toward fighting, the Royal Laotian Army and its adjunct, the Neutral Laotian Army, known respectively by their French names *force armée royale* and *force armée neutrale*, are plagued by extreme class distinctions between officers and enlisted men, widespread corruption, an absence of political or ideological motivation, and an awareness from long experience that a live-and-let-live policy is often the wisest. Under these circumstances, an American adviser's ability to influence events is often measured more by his personality and his control over American logistics support than by his military knowledge.

The cumulative cost of U.S. military support for Laos since 1962 runs into the billions of dollars, but the exact amount remains secret. Our support for the regular Laotian forces has grown to more than $90 million annually, as compared with the Laotians' own contribution of only $17 million a year. Our contribution does not include the amount we provide to the paramilitary forces nor does it include the cost for the American air operations in the war.

To maintain a color of compliance with the Geneva Accords, the large American logistics support for the Laotian forces is not administered by a typical military assistance group as in most other countries. Instead, such a group of Americans was assembled in neighboring Thailand under the command of a colonel carrying the deceptive title of "Deputy Chief of the Joint Military Advisory Group for Thailand." This group of supply and training experts do their work for Laos through the small Requirements Office in the AID mission in Laos referred to earlier and through frequent visits of their own to Laos. Thus there are no more than several hundred Americans in Laos who are directly involved in the war. The main American support is furnished by Americans who are stationed elsewhere, mainly Thailand.

American casualties in the Laotian war have not been high. Among Americans stationed in Laos, as the President has announced, there have been only about 50 men lost to hostile action. The number of American pilots stationed in Thailand or on the carriers, who have been lost over northern Laos, has never been publicly released. We know, however, that American aircraft lost over northern Laos up to January 1971 numbered less than 90.

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The Laotians themselves, on the other hand, have suffered enormously from this war. They have had more than 600,000 refugees since 1962. They have lost, by official reports, from 15,000 to 35,000 killed, and continue to lose men at the rate of 120–140 a month. According to former American Ambassador William Sullivan:

> It is pertinent to point out that the Lao themselves, a nation of less than 3 million, have suffered enormous casualties by their standards, . . . a loss that, proportional to the population of Laos, would be considered, I think, larger than the losses sustained by any other country on the face of this earth in that same period.

Perhaps even more vivid was the account of Edgar "Pop" Buell, the AID Director for the northeastern region of Laos in the May 1968 issue of *The New Yorker* Magazine:

> A few days ago, I was with V.P.'s [Vang Pao's] officers when they rounded up three hundred fresh Meo recruits. Thirty per cent of the kids were fourteen years old or less, and about a dozen were only ten years old. Another thirty per cent were fifteen or sixteen. The rest were thirty-five or over. Where were the ones in between? I'll tell you—they're all dead.

In the winter of 1970, the North Vietnamese poured considerably more men into northern Laos, reaching a reported strength of 33,000 men, and seemed on the verge of new and ominous gains. They retook the Plaine des Jarres, seized Vang Pao's base at Sam Thong and threatened his headquarters at Long Chien. To stop them the Laotian government forces and their American allies redoubled their efforts, including a single raid by B-52 bombers over the Plaine des Jarres. Thereupon the American press raised what seemed at the time to be a great hue and cry for fear such steps would lead to the introduction of American ground troops into Laos, claiming to perceive a parallel with our earlier involvement in Vietnam. In comparison to the later outcry at the use of American forces to raid the communist sanctuaries in Cambodia, these assertions in the press over Laos now seem little more than polite admonitions.

III

Regardless of the purported parallels with Vietnam, it seems very unlikely that the United States will send ground combat troops to defend the Vientiane government. To do so would be contrary to the Nixon doctrine announced on Guam. More important, perhaps, it would definitely go against the prevailing mood of the American people growing out of the frustrations of Vietnam, heightened by the dissension over the incursion into Cambodia. It would also be in violation of present legislation, Section 843 of the 1971 Defense Appropriations Act, which precludes the use of any funds so appropriated "to finance the introduction of American ground combat troops into either Laos or Thailand"—legislation which was publicly endorsed by the White House. (The legal effect of this legislation, however, will expire at the end of the period for which the appropriations in the act are provided.)

Further, our direct interests in Laos are small, and we are no longer using American ground troops in outright support of the Lon Nol government in Cambodia, which bears a rather similar relationship to the United States.

The Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad, of which Senator Stuart Symington is the chairman, explored at length the possibility of the United States becoming so involved in the fighting in Laos that we would be compelled to send ground troops if our other efforts should fail. The events in Laos are well worth studying in order to distinguish between the sorts of involvement, or "commitment," which lead on to more costly operations and those that do not.

For the sake of analysis, the pertinent relationships with another country may be categorized as follows: (1) a mutual defense treaty or other form of defense agreement, (2) unilateral declarations of support for the other country's security, (3) a significant presence of American troops there, (4) a moral obligation to defend it, and (5) some more general identification with its governing system, institutions or society.

The United States has no defense treaty or other written defense commitment with Laos. Until 1962, Laos was a protocol country, coming under the protection of the SEATO Treaty, but in accordance with the Geneva Accords of that year she disassociated herself from that treaty.

Under the Geneva Accords we are legally obligated to respect the neutrality of Laos, but we are under no legal responsibility to come to the defense of Laos in the event that her neutrality is violated by another. However, just to consider the legal rights and obligations of the parties does not answer the real question as to the significance of the agreement for determining the course of future American action. A lawyer's analysis of the clauses and provisos of the Geneva Accords serves little to reveal the true dynamics embodied in the document. Important international agreements such as mutual defense treaties and multilateral neutrality guarantees do not exist within self-contained legal systems, as do ordinary commercial contracts. In the international field there is no disinterested judge to decide the various rights and obligations of the parties, and there is no effective law-enforcement agency standing behind him to see that all concerned comply with his decision.

Instead, the only means for "enforcing" international agreements are the sense of comity and fair play that exists, to some extent, among nations and the concern each country has for the interpretation placed upon its words and actions by other powerful countries. This means that the overtones of an international agreement are often more important than the actual words in determining the conduct of nations. It also means that sometimes the opinion of a country not a party to the agreement is by far more significant in determining what one party may consider to be its responsibility than is the judgment of the other party. It means further that when the language of the accord is ambiguous, and it very often is, each party will act under that interpretation of the language which is most consistent with its own interests.

To illustrate, the language of the SEATO Treaty probably did not require American intervention in South Vietnam in 1965, the communist forces at that time being mainly indigenous South Vietnamese. Nevertheless, the treaty was one expression of the importance which the United States attached to South Vietnam in the eyes of the world. So among the variety of reasons that led the United States to take the fateful step it did in 1965 was a belief that failure to aid this treaty ally in its hour of desperation could well be interpreted to America's serious disadvantage by several more powerful nations, particularly communist China and Japan.

Coming back to the 1962 Geneva Accords, however, we see that they have never taken on a similar sanctity and meaning. They have always been considered an unhappy compromise. They were the best bargain that could be struck in a very awkward situation. Furthermore, their multilateral nature has tended to diffuse responsibility. No American leader would sound a call to the barricades to preserve the Geneva Accords.

Another aspect of our relationship with Laos which might have led to very unfortunate consequences was embraced in the high-sounding declarations on Laotian security by several American officials. One of the most egregious was that made in a news conference on March 15, 1961, by President Kennedy: "The security of all Southeast Asia would be endangered if Laos loses its neutral independence. Its own safety runs with the safety of us all. . . ."

In June 1964, President Johnson, in a speech in Minneapolis, warned that the United States was prepared "to risk war" to preserve the peace in Southeast Asia. And on October 13, 1966, President Johnson informed the press that he had told Souvanna Phouma that "the world must know that aggression will not succeed in Indochina." The obvious mistake in all of these well-intended statements is that they commit American prestige to the fulfillment of the spokesman's word. When the President speaks, he inevitably speaks for the entire country to the ears of the world.

Fortunately in the case of Laos an occasion never arose during the vitality of these declarations that would have required the United States to fulfill the noble sentiments expressed. Unlike radioactivity, the dangerous effects of such emissions are measured in fairly short half-lives. That is why foreign statesmen frequently insist upon a repetition of such expressions. For these declarations on Laos, the change in Administrations and the widespread discontent over events in Vietnam, as well as the simple passage of

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time, have tended to dissipate their meaning and implication. The present Administration has wisely refrained from overstating the importance we attach to Laos.

Another familiar commitment-making step is the stationing of U.S. forces, especially combat units, at various points around the globe. There are, however, very few truly American installations in the embattled areas of Laos, the loss of which is likely to generate an attitude in this country like the reaction over the loss of Americans at Pleiku or aboard the *Pueblo*. There are some facilities in the Vientiane area that could conceivably belong in this category, but, given the present attitude of Americans toward Southeast Asia, it is even unlikely that an attack on one of them would lead this country to plunge in with ground troops.

There is a fundamental distinction between assaults upon Americans qua Americans and those who happen to be present when others are being attacked. It is a matter of placement, proportion and purpose. As regrettable as would be the loss of any Americans in ancillary roles, that would not be likely to lead on to greater American involvement. The loss of the navigational aid facilities at Muong Phalane and Phou Pha Tri should be mentioned in this regard. These were small, but essentially American, facilities overrun by the communists at the cost of some American lives. They were instances, however, where all concerned realized risks were being assumed, and their loss, though regrettable, was not entirely unexpected or unprovoked.

An instance of a potential moral commitment is the very close relationship we have with General Vang Pao and his Montagnard forces. We have sustained him, and he has fought on with our urging. Perhaps one event can best portray this basis of an American obligation toward him and his people. In the summer of 1969, after Vang Pao had lost the battle for Muong Soui, he was very depressed. He informed his American advisers that he was seriously thinking of moving his people from their forward positions in the hills around the Plaine des Jarres to a more remote and peaceful area in the northwestern region of the country. We would have none of that. We urged, we cajoled, we persuaded and we advised against it. Vang Pao's spirit was revived. He rejoined the fight and went on in September of that year to sweep the communists from the Plaine des Jarres and capture large stores of their supplies and equipment.

If the communists were about to overrun Laos, the Americans might feel some responsibility to assist Vang Pao in evacuating his people to Thailand. It is reported that a few years ago he held secret discussions with Thai officials on resettling Meos in the region near the Thai-Laotian border. The American sense of obligation toward Vang Pao, however, is not so great as to lead to an American invasion of Laos. Already the Meos have suffered grievously by this war, and it has not led to direct American participation in the fighting on the ground. Their traditional nomadic experience is further reason why we would feel no obligation to save Laos for them.

There is still another instance of possible moral commitment. From time to time the communists have made proposals for settling the war in Laos. They apparently did so in 1967 and 1969, and they publicly made such a proposal in 1970. So far none of these efforts at peace has come to fruition. To some extent it has been Souvanna Phouma that has been uncompromising. In rejecting the earlier communist overtures, he must have been assuming the continuation of American support for his position. This assumes some element of American commitment; but, again, it is not so strong as for us to believe we owe him an American sacrifice as costly as that in Vietnam. Ambassador Sullivan confirmed this point before the Symington Subcommittee in response to a question from Senator Fulbright.

The Senator asked: "Do you think . . . Souvanna Phouma believes he has a commitment from our Government to support him?"

The Ambassador responded: "No, sir; I do not think so . . . because Souvanna Phouma . . . has had a series of associations with the United States, and I think he is a man without any illusions. . . . Without any illusions in terms of what these arrangements would signify."

Perhaps the best description of the American position in Laos was contained in the following words of Ambassador Sullivan before the Symington

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Subcommittee: "We used to use as a rule of thumb our ability to make it [our presence in Laos] reversible and terminate it within eight hours. It would probably take twenty-four hours now, but it still could be done."

Finally, on this subject of moral commitment one should mention the possibility of such an obligation toward the Thais for what they have contributed toward the defense of Laos. It would be the height of naïveté, however, for the United States to accept such a proposition, inasmuch as the Thais are doing what they are for Laos strictly in their own self-interest. It is reasonable to assume that both Thai and American officials realize this.

As far as a commitment through a general American identification with the Laotian cause, by contrast with Vietnam, the way we have "packaged" our position in Laos has been a classic case of low profile. Until recently the operation was an official secret. This secrecy was regrettable from an American constitutional point of view, and after a time should have ceased, but from the point of view of commitments it avoided the Vietnam type of entanglement. If we had ever been faced with the unfortunate choice between a Laotian capitulation and the dispatch of large numbers of American combat troops, we could have chosen the former and walked away from the situation. Even when the U.S. government decided on March 6 of last year to make a public acknowledgment of its activities in Laos, it did so in order to portray how little, not how much, we were doing there.

The Subcommittee on Commitments found no secret agreement committing this country to sending combat forces to Laos. The public's fascination with the possibility of such secret accords is understandable but greatly exaggerated. It would be a rare step indeed for any American administration to agree privately with another country in unambiguous language to send American troops into combat at some future date. What this country does do, like other countries, is to enter into secret arrangements of a military nature that spell out some of the collateral implications of basic, publicly announced policy. The private nature of these subordinate arrangements in itself decreases their force commitments, there being no world audience to have to convince with respect to their fulfillment. That is not to say that private accords can never have significance as commitments. They still carry moral implications and some bureaucratic entanglement, and are always subject to being revealed by a disgruntled party. And it is true that government programs, developed publicly or privately, have self-generating dynamics that can lead to consequences never contemplated by their creators.

The American attempt to provide Laos with substantial assistance without overcommitment will not face the ultimate test, of course, unless the communists press on in an attempt to take over the entire country. Only then can we know for certain whether the United States has ordered its affairs so that even a collapse of the non-communist forces would not compel us to send American combat troops into Laos. There are precedents in which this country has resisted the pressure to become so involved, even after large amounts of American assistance have been provided; namely, at the time of the collapse of the Nationalist Chinese in 1949 and the defeat of the French in Indochina in 1954.

This raises the highly puzzling question why the communists have apparently not attempted to take over the entire country. Recall, for instance, their surrounding the royal capital of Luang Prabang in 1969 without seizing it. There are a number of possible answers, all involving a good deal of speculation. Several rest upon the premise that to the North Vietnamese, just as to us, the war in South Vietnam is by far more important than the war in Laos.

First, it may be that the communists have no specific policy as to a political settlement for Laos pending the outcome of the war in South Vietnam. Since they cannot now see the outline of the settlement for Vietnam, they cannot answer what they consider acceptable for Laos.

Second, they may have feared that if they pressed on to the banks of the Mekong and seized Vientiane, this might have removed a significant inhibiting factor which until recently had dissuaded the Americans and South

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Vietnamese from invading the southern end of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the Laotian panhandle. With the South Vietnamese invasion of the panhandle in February, the relevance of this factor seems at an end. If it were the chief reason for the North Vietnamese to be comparatively inactive in northern Laos, we can now expect to see them become much more active there.

A third reason may be their uncertainty as to what the Americans and the Thais might do in that particular theater of the war. The communists may fear that such a marked shift in the military balance would lead to unforeseeable reprisals by Thai forces, supported by American air power, including the possibility of a broad-scale invasion from Thailand into the Mekong Valley of Laos. Such a prospect would certainly concern North Vietnam's Soviet and Chinese mentors.

A fourth possibility is simply that the North Vietnamese in Laos lack the wherewithal to achieve a complete military victory there without overburdening their limited resources needed elsewhere. Vang Pao's swift seizure of the Plaine des Jarres in September 1969 revealed surprising weakness on the part of the communists at that time. When their 1970 offensive failed to seize Vang Pao's headquarters at Long Chien they even had to relinquish his lesser base at Sam Thong, which they had captured and then held briefly.

Finally, it should be added that under the tripartite formula for governing Laos under the Geneva Accords, by which seats in the Laotian cabinet were distributed among the neutralists, the right-wing royalists and the communists, the Pathet Lao could obtain effective control of the government without seizing Vientiane. This could be done by the Pathet Lao's obtaining through negotiation a greater share of those seats for themselves and for neutralist factions sympathetic to them than were accorded in 1962. There is some indication from the communists' peace proposals and military operations that this may be the course they will choose.

IV

For a brief period in the spring of 1970 public attention focused once again on northern Laos because of the conflux of several events. Under President Nixon's Vietnamization program at that time the war in Vietnam seemed to be pleasing down, dull news. In contrast, the war in Laos was intensifying—more communist troops, 33,000 by March; large-scale fighting on the Plaine des Jarres and around Vang Pao's headquarters at Long Chien; the fall of his other base at Sam Thong; and most symbolic, a B-52 bombing raid in northern Laos for the first time. Moreover, based upon hearings held by Senator Symington's Foreign Relations Subcommittee the previous October, the Senate was becoming increasingly restive over the situation in Laos and more insistent upon public disclosure as to American participation and intention. Under these mounting pressures, President Nixon issued a public statement on March 6 explaining the American presence in Laos; and in April 1970 the Symington Subcommittee, with Administration acquiescence, was able to release a declassified version of its hearings, which provided more detail as to the American role. Laos was again page one copy.

Although the Symington Subcommittee held its hearings on Laos in October 1969, the State Department was reluctant to approve the release of a reasonably complete transcript of those hearings until public pressure became so great five months later as to make an official declaration on Laos unavoidable. The reasons given by the State Department for refusing for so long to draw public attention to American activities in Laos provide a revealing insight into the processes of foreign policy.

First, the State Department said the American government had agreed with Souvanna Phouma to keep such activities secret.

Second, they claimed that disclosure of a large American program in support of Souvanna Phouma would jeopardize his image as a neutral and thus hamper our efforts to reëstablish the Geneva Accords under which his neutrality was guaranteed.

Third, they contended that if this country were to admit its violations of the Geneva Accords, the other side, never having admitted its violations, would have a field day of propaganda.

Fourth, an official acknowledgment of our [illegible] the Soviet Union to take more positive action in support of our adversaries in Laos than it had theretofore done. This concern was based upon the proposition that the Soviet Union could ignore, and generally [illegible]

cial press reports of American violations of the Geneva Accords, but could not do so when the admission was made by American officials. Indeed, a high Soviet official had suggested as much to one of our diplomats.

The fifth reason was the belief that so long as the operation remained clandestine, it would be relatively easy for the United States to wash its hands of the situation should our position in Laos ever become untenable.

There was a sixth reason present, although unexpressed, which stemmed from the inherent nature of operations conducted in the absence of outside review. This was a tendency, neither malicious nor particularly conscious but nevertheless real, to facilitate one's own mode of operation. Thus it was tempting and convenient to agree with Souvanna Phouma when he asked that the operation be kept secret.

One of the reasons given by the State Department for continued secrecy deserves more extended comment; namely, the contention that public acknowledgment could make subsequent disengagement more difficult. It is true that public attention can commit political leaders to courses of action which they would not take privately. Disclosure sometimes compels government officials to inflate the importance of their programs in order to justify them.

However, this did not occur in the case of the public acknowledgment of our operations in Laos. Such acknowledgment was offered in a manner calculated to deëmphasize rather than overemphasize what we were doing. Thus, the basic principle of maintaining a well-informed public with respect to major issues of foreign policy was achieved without dressing up those policies to appear more vital, and hence more binding, than they really were.

Indeed, following such publicity none of the parade of horribles which the State Department had imagined did in fact occur. To the contrary, a step toward peace followed this disclosure, for which it might have, in part, been responsible. By coincidence, on the same day that the President disclosed the American role in Laos, the Pathet Lao announced a five-point peace proposal. In contrast to his replies to earlier communist peace proposals, Souvanna Phouma responded more favorably to this one. It is not unreasonable to assume that, as a result of the President's announcement, including his reference to sending no American combat troops to Laos, the Laotian Prime Minister was now less certain of full American support and therefore more receptive to a negotiated settlement.

V

The United States' avowed goal in Laos is the reëstablishment of the Geneva Accords of 1962, which means withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces from that country and continuation of the tripartite formula for governing Laos that gives the balance of political power to Souvanna Phouma's neutralists. Since the other side does not seem disposed to accept such a settlement voluntarily, the American policy has mainly been to continue our military support for Souvanna Phouma.

Our interests there are basically twofold. First, we wish to keep the communists away from the Thai border. Thailand, our SEATO ally, is considerably more important to us than is Laos. The Thais are already experiencing a communist insurgency in their northern and northeastern provinces. If communist forces were present in Laos all along the Thai border, the North Vietnamese and Chinese could greatly increase their aid to this insurgency, and even an invasion by infiltration or otherwise would not be out of the question.

As one American policy-maker has put it, if through "the nickels and dimes" effort we are making in Laos, we can put off the hard questions we would have to face in Thailand, the effort is well worth making. The only problem is that this effort is about at the level where it can no longer be counted in nickels and dimes, although perhaps it still may be worthwhile.

The second American interest in the war in northern Laos rests in the fact that the continuation of a government in Vientiane that acquiesces in what we are doing against the communist traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail makes our operations there a bit easier. But this second interest must be kept in perspective. There is really very little Souvanna can do about events in that

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part of his country. One would doubt seriously that the United States and its allies would stop their efforts to block the Trail merely because a government opposed to such operations had come to power in Vientiane.

In deciding upon American policy toward Laos, one should consider the plight of the Laotian people and the relatively static nature of the battle line over the years. The Laotians have suffered greatly from this war, and most of them have very little to gain whichever side may prevail. Furthermore, there is very little sense of national identity among them. They are much more oriented to their village and region. It is only slightly overstated to say that in political development they stand today where the European states stood hundreds of years ago.

In view of American interests, particularly our desire to keep the communists off the Mekong, we should welcome and encourage any settlement, de facto or otherwise, that recognizes the existing battle line as the peacetime demarcation line between communist and non-communist forces in Laos. The front is a more definite concept in the Laotian war than in the rest of Indochina. Almost any peace is better for the Laotians than the existing conflict. Furthermore, the steadfastness of the present government in Vientiane, in the byzantine circumstances of today, can never be assured. The ominous presence of thousands of Chinese troops in Laos is another important impetus for peace on any reasonable terms. A ceasefire along the present, or any recent, battle line will, therefore, probably maximize the chances that a non-communist government will continue to function in the Mekong Valley. Such a settlement can be made (if the other side is willing) without regard to the fighting along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. That conflict must await the resolution of the greater war of which it is a part.